DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 335 CS 211 341

AUTHOR Wiley, Mark L.
TITLE The Contexts of Composing: A Dynamic Scene with Movable Centers.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (39th, St. Louis, MO, March 17-19, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Higher Education; Language Role; Phenomenology; *Self Concept; Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Academic Community; Academic Language; *Author Text Relationship; Discourse Aims; Husserl (Edmund); Writing Attitudes

ABSTRACT

An examination of the transformations that the concept of genius undergoes when viewed through the apparently incommensurable expressivistic and social views of composing helps to reconcile phenomenologically objective descriptions of composing with value-laden descriptions of the self in the act of writing. When the description of composition is changed, a different aspect of the complex act of composition is highlighted and the center of the composing act is moved to a new location. Both descriptions carry with them assumptions on the value of writing and of the notion of the "self" writing. A series of brief but contrasting descriptions of the composing process serves to suggest representative positions compositionists have taken. In the expressivistic view, the self struggles both with and against language in order to understand and extend the autonomous self but loses opportunities to enlarge and enrich the self through participation in cooperative projects. The self in the social constructivist view must conform to linguistic form and convention but decreases self-definition. If Husserlian phenomenology is to aid in the study of the complex act of composing, it must take into account individuals composing in various scenes, directed toward different purposes, and using a variety of discourse forms. How composing processes are understood and described has important consequences for the writing teacher's students, not only in the classroom but later when they leave the university. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED296335

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

The Contexts of Composing: A Dynamic Scene with Movable Centers

MARK L. WILEY

Department of English
University of Southern California

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mark L. Wiley

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS211341

ABSTRACT

This is the third paper of three presented for a panel at the 1988 CCCC Convention in St. Louis, Missouri. The title of the panel was "Images, Experiences, and Contexts of Composing." My paper attempts to reconcile phenomenologically objective descriptions of composing with value-laden descriptions of the self in the act of writing. I first look at the concept of genius as it functions in expressivist rhetorics and then trace the transformations this "genius" undergoes in social views of composing. The challenge for compositionists is not to have to choose one description over another but to understand what is gained and lost when we change our descriptions of the composing act.

Paper Presented at the 1988 CCCC Convention, St. Louis, MO.

The Contexts of Composing: A Dynamic Scene with Movable Centers

MARK L. WILEY

Our second speaker here today claims that Husserlian phenomenology offers compositionists an investigative mode valuable to our understanding of the experience of composing. Moreover, she distinguishes between accidental and essential properties, especially as these pertain to our first speaker's discussion of the "genius" concept. But we also need to look at how this concept has been used by compositionists as a term of value in describing the composing process. Thus my concern here is to find out what happens to this "genius" in the composition class of the '80s.

So far today we have learned that "genius" has functioned to focus creative power within the autonomous individual and ultimately to distinguish the person as a unique, singular being capable of original production. Yet, with the onslaught of structuralism and, more recently, post-structuralism, the concept of genius (and for that matter every substantial notion of the self) has been subjected to a radical critique.

We use the term "genius" much more rarely today and certainly much more guardedly, avoiding, if possible, any metaphysical overtones. Yet, as the title of this convention suggests, the "self" remains an object of our concern. In the composition literature we possess accounts of modern romantic versions of composing (also labelled sometimes as a

vitalist or as an expressivist rhetoric). These accounts contrast with cognitive, social constructivist, and deconstructionist views of composing, and hence present compositionists with a seemingly incommensurable array of perspective lenses through which we might view these acts.

My purpose here then is not to offer you an overview of each of these perspectives, but rather to examine the transformations this concept of genius undergoes, particularly as we currently seem to be moving away from an individual toward a social view of composing. Each time we change descriptions, we highlight different aspects of this complex act. Moreover, each description also carries with it a sometimes explicit and an always implicit assumption of the value of writing as well as of the self writing. Changing descriptions moves the center of the composing act to a different location. As an example, the genius concept locates one center inside the individual writer, and, as a term of substance, it offers grounding for an often nebulous selfhood. On the other hand, a social view of composing removes this substantial grounding of the self and replaces it with a relational and contextual view, which implicitly defines the self according to the activities she is presently involved in. Thus, in order to extend this analysis further, I will begin by focusing on the expressivists, and then move to consider what happens to this figure of genius as it appears in social views of writing; specifically as it appears in accounts of composing occurring within the academic discourse community. I will also try to bring into

my discussion of these issues the role that phenomenology might play in helping us sort out some of the perplexities we face in understanding compositional acts. Finally, I will conclude with an estimation of what we collectively both stand to gain and lose because of these transformations.

I believe that when such notable compositionists as Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow, Ann Berthoff, William Coles, Jr., James Britton, James Moffett, and, sometimes, Donald Murray began writing about composing 15-20 years ago, they were attempting to reestablish the grounds for individual authorship. They were attempting to free the writing self from what was perceived by them to be an enslavement to textual forms and conventions. They sought to open a space in the writing class where students could discover a more authentic self, or, more pointedly as with Coles, to construct a representative of one's self in language. The text was devalued as a purely formal, institutional product made impersonally and mechanically. And replacing it in this privileged position was the student writer, who, as an active agent became the focus of composing studies. In the expressivist rhetoric, texts were viewed as organically related to the uniquely active minds of the writers producing them.

The composing process was, and generally still is, described by these compositionists as a rhythmic movement, alternating between activity and passivity, between struggle and play. In this rhythmic pattern writer and language continually exchange positions from active agent to passive

agency. In one moment the writer struggles with a recalcitrant linguistic medium, pushing it along in order to force it to yield to the writer's developing sense of meaning. In the alternate phase, the writer becomes the agency of language. Here the writer gives in to the play of words, allowing the now active linguistic agent to pull the writer along toward possibilities of meaning previously unforeseen. In this version of composing the relationship between writer and text is an ambiguous one. Where the self writing and the self being written each begin and end is unclear. But this temporary ambiguity of identity is deemed necessary in order to recover or discover meaning. One must be willing to immerse oneself in chaos before one can re-emerge with the gaining of new order. The writer as author is not so much a substantially new self as much as she is an extension of a foundational self, although a foundational self not yet completely developed. The textual production of this extended self in a composition written in the student's own language helps her to adjust more readily to the academic environment. With this kind of composing process she can now better identify herself as a writer within the university. Hence, in this closed and protected environment, genius serves as a valued category of identity toward which any student can strive and potentially win for herself. Authentic production offers the boon of a substantial identity for student writers, winning for them a new image of themselves as self-sufficient, unique, and autonomous agents.

We must remember, however, that these composing

descriptions of potential student geniuses by compositionists are highly interpretive, evaluative, and obviously decidedly rhetorical in their calculated effects upon fellow writing teachers. To bring this out more pointedly, I shall offer you a series of brief but contrastive descriptions of composing. But, first, let's imagine for a moment that all of us are researchers. And we are now observing at a distance several scenes of individuals in the act of composing. Consider what we might witness. We probably would not detect any measurable difference in the overt physical actions struggling writers manifest. We might note that many writers sit for extended periods, sometimes scribbling or typing furiously, sometimes vacantly staring at bare walls or shaded windows, sometimes fidgeting in their seats and then suddenly jumping up and pacing around their desks. Many of these writers might gulp coffee, smoke cigarettes, nibble continuously on tidbits, or menacingly munch on canary yellow, number two pencils.

Moreover, after many such observations, we might detect commonalities across various composing episodes and then proceed to prescribe optimal settings for writers to write in, perhaps designating correct sitting postures and even proper diets for writers to maintain. However these prescriptions probably won't succeed in producing better writers. So, inquiring further, we might next consider composing as an essentially mental act. We can now approach our young writers and simply ask them to describe what it is that they think they are doing. No doubt we would hear

different stories. One writer might tell us that she is deeply caught up in the valiant but sometimes playful quest to make meaning. Another might confess that he is sweating over the dutiful cranking out of a standard weekly theme to submit for red pencilling by his stern taskmaster. A third student might reveal that she is a novice, practicing the gestures and conventions of academic discourse in order to eventually gain entrance into such a privileged community. A fourth student might relate that he is composing to solve a problem, and that he begins with tentative plans which he then attempts to instantiate as he composes, making numerous strategic decisions along the way to realizing his projected goal. And our final writer might proudly assert that he, too, is valiantly and always seriously struggling to compose. However, he is not writing in order to win insight and truth, but rather in order to unmask an ideology, which has deceived him into believing that he really is an autonomous agent, acting independently and expressing in his own language the essence of his being.

These several stories of composing are, of course, not definitive or complete; nevertheless, I do hope that they suggest representative positions compositionists have taken and are taking regarding our understanding of composing. Still, as investigators, we must deal with these apparently incommensurable descriptions. We have also learned today that Husserlian phenomenology insists that researchers delineate and then focus on an object of inquiry. However the problem in composition now, as I think it always has

been, is our inability to agree on just what that object is. If we can at least agree that composing is primarily a mental act, then we encounter further dilemmas. Afterall, just what is a mental act anyway? Mental acts imply theories of minds and of selves who use those minds. Our transformations of the genius concept in composition present not so much theories of mind as much as they often offer value-laden prescriptions of identities students should strive to realize as well as suggestions concerning how students might put their minds to better use.

Thus, if we agree that composing is primarily a mental act, then we might consider the validity of Sondra Perl's and Arthur Egendorf's (1986) reported phenomenological findings that there is a rhythm to composing and that this rhythm alternates between, ir one moment, the having of a vague sense of wanting to say something and, in another instance, of then actively crafting our ideas projectively. With such agreement, we might thus proceed to try to understand how such an account might fit in with or deviate from other accounts, specifically romantic, expressivists' accounts of composing where a rhythm is posited, but where writers don't always feel in control of a language which often seems somehow alien to them. We might try to account for that feeling where language seems to be shaping words into ideas writers never knew that they knew, making them feel as if those ideas were actually arising from somewhere other than the inside of their heads. We could investigate other appearances that language possibly manifests to consciousness

during composing, and then compare such descriptions to those offered by others claiming that writing is "essentially" a social act. When we turn to seeing composing as social, we privilege context over the individual; and, with such a shift in perspective, our descriptions of mind and self will undergo subsequent transformations.

As I mentioned earlier, the expressivist rhetoric has come under increasing attacks, stemming from current theories of language. One attack focusses on the fact that the emphasis on process still does not remove composing from the process-product dichotomy. That even though the original liberatory gesture was noteworthy, it continues to ignore the institutional fact that students still must produce approximations of academic discourse. The genre of the freshman essay works against the creatively expressive products of the liberated writer.

The second critique centers on the writer herself. Poststructuralism posits differance as at work within any discourse, language, or within consciousness itself. All things knowable, aside from the physical experience of brute facts, are embodied in language. Writing and the self who writes and the texts written form an inextricable fabric or web or tissue, of meanings, figures whose origins and ends are untraceable. Within social views of writing, writers are immersed in language and can only begin to write from a position already located inside a web of textual codes. On this view authorship is a form of social production, whereby certain kinds of texts are privileged over others because

they are judged more acceptable to the standards of a particular community. Authors, or, more appropriate for our discussion, experienced writers, are authorized to speak only because of their qualified membership within a specific discourse community. James Porter defines this community as "...a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated" (38-39). All members share assumptions about what are appropriate objects for inquiry; about what kinds of operating functions are performed on those objects; about what constitutes evidence and validity; and about what formal conventions are followed. In institutionalized discourse communities, systems act to constrain speech, setting up regulations and appropriate conditions for speaking. Citing Vincent Leitch, Porter says that the system operates to specify who speaks, what may be spoken, and how it is spoken; rules prescribe what is true and false, and what is reasonable and foolish.

Given this description of discourse communities, a growing number of compositionists and literary scholars are labelling the university as such a community. Hence, our genius, when she enters comp 101 as a lowly freshman, embarks upon a long initiation into the rigors of academic discourse. As a novice to this community, she possesses no authority to speak, but she will, nevertheless, immediately be required to speak as if she really is a worthy member. And how well she meets this contradictory challenge over the next few years will determine whether she finally succeeds or fails in the

university. David Bartholomae describes what these young initiates must accomplish: "[They must] learn...to extend themselves, by successive approximations, into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions and necessary connections that determine the 'what might be said' and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community" (146).

Needless to say our genius is in trouble. In fact, that very identity is denied to her until she learns to perform skillfully all of the things Bartholomae describes. Personal insight, imagination, voice, authenticity, intentions, even meaning, as these terms form a conceptual constellation around our central concept of genius, are transformed when composing becomes social. These terms are derived from the context of writing and have no meaning outside of the socially intelligible system within which these concepts are embedded. Composing in the academy becomes institutionalized. The context of the composition class serves as a portal for entry into the larger university community. The comp teacher represents the institution, and she makes that institution come alive when she enacts that role in the classroom. Whatever versions of themselves students possess outside of this classroom context become less relevant in this new institutional setting. Our genius is now a former genius as she must (again to cite Bartholomae) "...find some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of

convention, the history of a discipline, on the other" (135). Her personal identity as a unique individual actually becomes a liability when entering this new community. She must cast off this version of herself and assume an institutional self, and write in genres and about topics specified by the academic community.

Institutionalized composing thus begins as a form of initiation. Bartholomae describes a double action in this initiation reminiscent of but not identical with the twin alternating moments of composing described by expressivists. He labels these moments gestures, seeing one as imitative and one as critical. The writer imitates the language of the privileged community, while also working against a language that would render him just like everybody else. Thus genius is born when the student writer can successfully appropriate the discourse of the academy and can begin to recombine already given elements into new arrangements, causing readers to see familiar things in slightly different ways. These new arrangements of elements, however, still must be embodied within acceptable textual forms as defined by the standards set by the community. Hence our genius is not the wild and free genius of the romantics as much as she is a rather subdued, constrained sort.

Both the romantic view and the view of writing as socialization emphasize identity; however they assume completely different beginnings and endings. The maker of meaning begins with a foundational, although undeveloped, incoherent image of self, and struggles both with and against

language in order to open up possibilities for new understandings and extensions of that same autonomous self. Yet this gain in self-definition is at the expense of lost opportunities to enlarge and enrich the self through participating in cooperative projects and in community-buliding. In contrast, the initiate to the academic community must submit whatever self-coherence she possesses prior to entering the academy to reformulation within the often discontinuous linguistic forms and conventions of the privileged community. For some students the discontinuity is so great that they cannot successfully integrate this new self of the academy with their prior self. The unsuccessful students eventually either reject the demands of the new community or they embrace this new community so all-encompassingly that they forget who they used to be, or at least they try to forget. But in such efforts individuals lose their personal histories and risk psychic disintegration.

Our understanding and descriptions of what we do in the composition class are extremely important. If phenomenology is to aid compositionists in understanding the complexity of the composing act, it must take into account several spheres of influence as each impinges on any given composing process. Such accounts would include but not be limited to individuals composing in various scenes, directed toward different purposes, and using a variety of discourse forms. It would certainly take into account the "I" of composing as well as the "we," attempting to understand how individuals experience

the community when they compose. If phenomenology can provide us with these valuable insights, then we all will have gained much. For, finally, how we understand and describe composing processes has important consequences for the students we teach--not just for how they understand and define themselves while they are in our classrooms, but also consequences for who they might become later when they leave the university.

WORKS CITED

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." When A Writer Can't Write. Ed. Mike Rose. New York: The Guilford Press, 1985. 134-165.

Perl, Sondra, and Arthur Egendorf. "The Process of Creative Discovery: Theory, Research, and Implications for Teaching." The Territory of Language: Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition. Ed. Donald McQuade. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP. 1986. 250-268.

Porter, James E. "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community." Rhetoric Review 5 (1986): 34-47.